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THE MYTH OF REAGAN'S MISTAKEN VIEW ON SAUDI ARABIA

I have the dreadful feeling that the very heart of American Middle East policy is President Reagan's grossly distorted view of Saudi Arabia. More than any previous American President, Reagan appears to believe that the Saudi royal family and the elite over which it presides is totally secure, moderate, responsible, deeply and sincerely pro-American, and, in general, unambivalently attached to the "West".

President Reagan is undoubtedly deeply influenced by the fact that his Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, and a number of other men, long close to him, have direct ties to Bechtel Corporation. Bechtel is playing a key role in providing Saudi Arabia with roads, sewers, communications network, etc. Bechtel enjoys a pleasant and profitable relationship with Saudi Arabia. It does not follow that this relationship should be a model for American-Saudi affairs.

It is on the basis of an extremely rosy view of Saudi Arabia that Reagan proposed the AWACS deal. Were it not for an uproar in Congress -- including a lot of opposition from congressmen not particularly friendly to Israel -- this incredible proposal would be moving along towards fulfillment.

The Administration's view of Saudi Arabia is reflected again in the recent emergency trip of Reagan's special envoy in charge of the Lebanon crisis to Riyadh. Why to Riyadh? I have not been able to figure out what role Reagan envisions for the Saudis. Certainly, the Saudis cannot influence Israel. Yet, in view of the fact that the Saudis and Syrians are supporting opposite sides in the Iraq-Iran war, and hold opposite views of the Soviet threat, why would anyone expect the Saudis to have influence in Syria?

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The Habib mission to Saudi Arabia should not be dismissed as a matter of "touching all bases". The President himself, in the midst of his recuperation from serious injuries, met at length with an unnamed Saudi Arabian prince at the White House. There are indications that this meeting was intended to be kept secret. As the crisis intensified in Jerusalem and Damascus, the Reagan Administration turned to Mecca for salvation.

The Iran parallel cannot be stressed too much. Despite the great differences between the two countries, there are extremely important parallels. Like the late Shah, the Saudi "royal family" has extremely shallow historical roots. Like the Shah, no one really knows how popular it is among the masses -- or how popular it will be during the stressful days of rapid modernization which lies ahead. Remember the Shah's problems developed not out of Iranian stagnation, but out of swift, discontinuous and undemocratic modernization. Will the Saudis fare better?

Finally, it is naive to see the Saudis as "Dutch uncles", mediating between Israel and the Arabs or between rival Arab states. They simply do not have the objectivity, detachment or stature to play such a role. I hope that President Reagan soon realizes that only an openly pro-Israel American policy can bring balance to a region now so badly imbalanced by Soviet SAM missiles, 70 million Arabs, and oceans of oil -- all on the same side of the scale.

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